Forms, Organic and Mercurial: Karl Blossfeldt, Francis Bruguière and British Modernist Sculpture

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Regrettably, one can only conjecture as to whether the artist Paul Nash first encountered the photographs of Karl Blossfeldt and Francis Bruguière in the Warren Gallery in November of 1929; although, given that he displayed there himself in 1927, we might assume that Nash followed its unabashedly contemporary exhibitions program with especial interest. Certainly, in his later writings, Nash would refer to the work of both photographers in ways that indicate how central to British aesthetics it appeared by the early 1930s. In a 1932 review of Blossfeldt's beguiling photographic compendium of plant forms, he declared that in "*Art Forms in Nature* we have an intensely interesting example of the peculiar power of the camera to discover formal beauty which ordinarily is hidden from the human eye".[1] Indeed, Nash felt inclined to appraise Blossfeldt's work in terms of the imaginative stimulus it provided the visual arts, rather than, as Blossfeldt suggested in his foreword, as a vehicle to "stimulate observation of our own plant world".[2] For Nash, such a purpose, however well-intentioned, seemed to misunderstand photography's aesthetic potential for it was "the camera eye directed by acute human perception which is responsible for these remarkable observations". Far from invigorating the observational powers of the artist themself, "these important forms", he claimed, "do not exist for our vision except by virtue of a mechanical scientific process".[3]

Since the publication of the first edition of Blossfeldt's photographs in 1929, Nash observed, it had become common practice to "find likenesses between his floral forms and examples of antique art in sculpture, iron and woodwork"; as, he briskly noted, had been most recently demonstrated by an exhibition held at the Zwemmer Gallery in London, which, in displaying Blossfeldt's plates alongside vegetal forms in wood, stone and iron, "showed the extraordinary similitude in design between the natural growths and the 'inventions' of art".[4] It is perhaps worth considering here if such tactics recalled an underlying principle of the Warren Gallery hang itself in which visual resemblances between Blossfeldt's plant magnifications and Bruguière's 'abstract' photographs were implicitly suggested.[5]

"Are we to suppose", Nash wrote, "that the old artists derived inspiration from minute examination of natural phenomena?" While, in certain cases, it might be possible to claim that nature supplied artists with a *motif*, in many others "it would have been impossible to detect the significance of natural design without the aid of a mechanical process". Thus, for Nash, this was "where the camera's eye prove[d] its incalculable power", not simply as a "curious discoverer of 'interesting' comparisons between art and nature [but] in the wealth of matter it places at the disposal of the modern sculptor or painter".[6]

As Nash himself acknowledged, the first British critic to touch upon this aspect of photography's influence was Reginald Wilenski, who, in a provocative thesis of 1932 – *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture* – looked to Blossfeldt's photographs for evidence of new trends in contemporary British sculpture. Although, Wilenski perceived, there had long been supposed by Romantics an antithesis between geometric form and organic nature, this attitude had begun to be challenged by those modern sculptors who saw that "geometric form abounds in the animal and vegetable world […] and had begun to presume […] that geometric form is *symbolic* of the organic".[7] One need look no further, he commented, than Blossfeldt's macrophotographs of geometrically ordered flowers, tendrils, buds and seedpods, for proof of this universal truth:

> These photographs transform the apparently ragged constituents of a tangled hedgerow into a series of structures informed with a most definite shape, with most evident order and most evident logic. The study of these photographs makes it quite clear that the artist who reacts to the superficial tangled appearance of nature […] is producing the kind of art which Socrates described as 'only conjecture' […], and that the artist who gives us truth of form is the artist who symbolises the forms contained in the hedgerow by geometric forms'.[8]

And this truth to form, this quest to find "formal principles in natural structures and formal order in geometry, architecture and sculpture", was most evident in the work of Wilenski's contemporaries, Richard Bedford and Henry Moore, which, he claimed, eloquently displayed the principle that "all human, animal and vegetable forms [were] different manifestations of common principles of architecture", as was evinced by the way in which Blossfeldt's magnified pictures of the vegetable kingdom echoed the "formal meaning" of architectural structures or other pieces of human craftsmanship. [9] Just as the image of a Buddhist sculpture

of a bird recalled for Wilenski a shoot of flowering ash, so too one can imagine the smooth-edged geometry of Moore's *sculptures* reminding him of the corrugated regularity of Blossfeldt's photographs in ways that persuasively confirmed his belief in the "universal analogy of form".[10]

Fig.1

Wilenski was not alone in finding parallels between Blossfeldt's photographs and an underlying harmony in nature that artists intuitively obeyed. Anthony Blunt, in a 1934 article on 'Nature and Design', referred closely to *Art Forms in Nature* while speculating as to the exact relationship Cinquecento artists enjoyed with nature; a nature, so he maintained, that the generation of Raphael believed "to be an almost rational being who acted according to certain general laws and who would always follow these laws and produce objects of regular beauty".[11] This "intellectual, almost mathematical, attitude towards nature", Blunt wrote, in terms strikingly reminiscent of Wilenski's musings, was nowhere more apparent than in Blossfeldt's photographs which showed "that nature is far more mathematical than we are led to suppose by a superficial study, and [Blossfeldt's] discoveries make it clear that the Italians of the sixteenth century were not always so far from the truth as we used to consider".[12] And Wilenski's own response to *Art Forms in Nature* had clearly been foregrounded by Walter Benjamin who, on the occasion of the publication of the German edition in 1928, had averred that:

> Even the most passive observer would be thrilled to see that the enlargement of parts of plants visible to the eye could be as extraordinary as plant cells glimpsed through a microscope. When we remember that Klee and, even more, Kandinsky worked for so long on the elaboration of forms which only the intervention of the microscope could – brusquely and violently – reveal to us, we notice that these enlargements of plants also contain original stylistic forms.[13]

Whilst both Benjamin and Wilenski took note of how closely the visions of contemporary artists paralleled the underlying structure of nature as it was revealed by Blossfeldt's tome, Nash respectfully disagreed. Though "sympathetic" to Wilenski's position, he was much keener to see Blossfeldt's photographs less as proof of nature's primary, geometric order, than as persuasive evidence of the influence of the new photography on modern art. To be

sure, "the manifestations of modern photography", Nash commented, "not only support the statements of many so-called 'perverse' sculptors and painters, but run parallel to and, to a great degree, influence the course of modern art".[14] An increasing desire for a more ordered, architectural style of sculpture and painting, had, he confirmed, made itself felt among the younger school of artists, among whom Edward Burra was especially prominent in "his passion for solid individual shapes rounded and stippled to a high degree of finish with intense concentration upon highlights" and the peculiar emphasis upon the drama of surface properties he gave to isolated objects, such as baskets or "such foods as fruits and hams", which seemed to thus employ 'suggestions which photography may well have supplied'.[15] Ironically, it was most likely Wilenski's 1927 text, *The Modern Movement in Art*, which furnished Nash with the germ of this understanding as therein Wilenski addressed the subject of photography's influence on nineteenth-century painting and how, for example, the silvered-tones of Corot's Arcadian landscapes faithfully reflected the shimmering grayscale of the Daguerreotype and early collodion photographic plates.[16] Could, therefore, the simplified, regular forms of a contemporary sculpture, such as Bedford's *Flower* with its bifurcating, upward thrust, and attentiveness to the play of light and shadow upon its twining, vegetal volume, be less an indication of a form-language substantiated by Blossfeldt than a demonstration of how plant forms, photographed in isolation and meticulous close-up, provided something of a stylistic stimulus to the imagination of the modern artist? Surely, this is the question Nash raises in the light of Blossfeldt's photographs. And, as such, it could be asked just as readily of nonfigurative sculptures like Barbara Hepworth's egg-shaped carvings, which seem to reflect, albeit abstractly, the volumes of Blossfeldt's smoothly contoured seed-heads and blossoms, beheld in their separateness, as it could of artworks which more faithfully represented nature's forms.

Fig. 2

Although Nash's thesis applied more generally to the new photography, the perceived influence of Blossfeldt was itself – as Nash passingly acknowledged – a product of those novel photographic apparatuses which, in the early decades of the twentieth-century, had considerably enhanced the perspicacity of the camera's eye. In his eulogistic preface to *Art Forms in Nature*, Karl Nierendorf observed how new lens technologies had, in effect, brought humankind closer to nature's vital murmurations and hidden intimacies: "In film, thanks to the time-lapse cine camera, he can watch the swelling and shrinking, the breathing and the

growth of plants. The microscope reveals whole systems of life in drops of water, and the instruments of the observatory open up the infinity of the universe. It is technology which affords us the new means for artistic development".[17] And, thus Nierendorf explained, through photographic magnification Blossfeldt had similarly contributed to this new technological aesthetic.

It is perhaps unsurprising that books of close-up photography, published in the wake of Blossfeldt's volume, frequently alluded to the aesthetic possibilities obtained by new lens technologies and how the manifest intricacy of nature beheld close-to challenged even the inventiveness of the contemporary artist. Browsing through the grandiloquent picture captions of an album of photomicrography – that was published in 1935 under the title of *World beneath the Microscope* – one reads, for example, that the "lavish invention of nature is manifest in a granule of sponge. Has the abstract painter of today achieved anything more interesting than this evolutionary design?"[18] So too, the author claimed, must the modern sculptor "envy the massiveness of form, the grandeur of contour", of the shell of a sea-urchin, imaged in a startling degree of magnification, "whose dovetailing structure makes a strange and interesting pattern".[19] And I am minded to recall, in the author's bald assertion that under enlargement radiolaria "appear even more beautiful than many Chinese carvings", Wilenski's comparison of a wooden bird sculpture in the Buddhist temple of Horyuji to the geometry of form patent in Blossfeldt's photograph of an ash sprig.[20]

Undoubtedly, Wilenski's belief that modern sculpture repeated a geometry, perceptible in Blossfeldt's plant forms, but inherent to living nature, was informed by a then popular interest in morphology and how certain proportions or rhythms appeared to be constant in both nature and art. Perusing the review pages of interbellum periodicals, for example, one finds evidence of a sizeable range of publications whose theme was, to paraphrase the art writer Vernon Blake, to determine if a metric of aesthetic sensation, present within nature and art, was somehow geometrically quantifiable.[21] This bibliography, which included such classic works as Jay Hambidge's 1920 meditation on dynamic symmetry and vegetative patterns of inflorescence, as well as Theodore Andrea Cook's encyclopaedic analysis of logarithmic spirals in art and nature, *The Curves of Life*, addressed the ubiquity of the Golden Section in life and art: a ratio which found its geometrical expression in the corkscrew shape of the equiangular spiral or curve.[22] It was, Cook asserted, "the best formula for Perfect Growth [and] an underlying reason for artistic proportions".[23] The most recent contribution to

this field of study was by the Romanian polymath, Matila Ghyka, who, in two works published between 1927 and 1931, attempted to explain the frequency of the Golden Section in everything from morphology and physiognomy, to aesthetics and poetry.[24] Although, for Blake, such theories had begun to tarnish in the light of non-Euclidean geometry, which had upset the faith in geometrical constancy so central to Golden Section lore; for the critic, Herbert Read, in his Quixotic attempt to ascertain a universal morphology of art, the geometrical hypotheses of Cook *et al* were persuasive and led him to advise his readers that "this ideal proportion, so logically and rationally determined by pure thought, plays a preponderant part in the morphology of the natural world, both organic and inorganic".[25] Likewise, Read pondered, was it not peculiar how readily Renaissance artworks appeared to structurally resolve themselves into this geometrical ratio?[26] Contemporary art, he observed, though less readily reconcilable within the Golden Section measure, nonetheless subtly reflected nature's underlying structure as it was geometrically hypothesized by morphologists, such as D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, who sought to assign to forms in nature "the harmony and proportion we usually ascribe only to works of art".[27] Hence were abstract artworks of "more than decorative significance in that [they repeated] in their appropriate materials and on their appropriate scale certain proportions and rhythms which are inherent in the structure of the universe, and which govern organic growth".[28] In these theories, to which one might be justified in ascribing a certain Gnostic inscrutability, can be discerned a morphological context in which to situate Wilenski's own observations regarding a primary geometrical order in nature and hence Blossfeldt's role in its subsequent revelation.

Wilenski's belief that a sense of geometry underlay modern sculpture was not shared by everyone, especially in the case of Moore, whose work, it was acknowledged by critics such as Geoffrey Grigson, appeared to fall within a framework of interpretation that was 'biomorphic' or otherwise indicative of nature's undulant irregularity. Such discrepancies though often appear to be more a matter of terminology than outright disagreement, as most commentators of the time perceived, in the diversity of practice then apparent in contemporary art, a shared interest in revealing the elementary forms of nature, be they of an abstractly 'organic' or 'geometrical' quality. Read, for example, remarked that while he considered most "intimations of reality are of the organic type, and intimately linked to the essential forms of life, there are other aspects of reality of a more mathematical and crystalline nature which may equally form the basis of artists' creations. Perhaps Ben Nicholson's tend in this direction; while Henry Moore's for example, are more obviously

organic. But it would be a mistake to make any hard and fast distinction, because reality is a unity, of which organic and inorganic forms are but polar aspects".[29] Grigson, for one, understood biomorphism to exist in the hinterlands "between Mondrian and Dali", as a sort of softening of hard-edged abstraction or degrading of realism, and one can easily imagine how Moore's gently tumescent forms appeared to Grigson and Wilenski alike as symbols of nature's primary morphology as it was revealed by close-up photography, be it subtly geometrical or else vitally rounded. Both writers saw in the work of Moore the revelation afforded by lens-based technology; yet whereas for Wilenski this relationship was framed chiefly by Blossfeldt's photographs, Grigson cast his net wider to include not only the visible forms of nature made startlingly large (as plants were by Blossfeldt), but also those hidden, tiny things, made seeable by modern science: "Rounded shapes by Moore may be related to a breast, or a pear, or a bone […]. But they might also relate to the curves of a human embryo, to an ovary, a sac, or to a single-celled primitive organism. Revealed by anatomy or seen with a microscope, such things are now included in our visual knowledge. Art, or the forms of art, change with such knowledge".[30] Such comments, with their attentiveness to science's influence on the optical unconscious, thus recall Nierendorf's introduction to Blossfeldt's volume, in which he spoke of how those new lens technologies, such as the microscope, had brought us into greater intimacy with a natural world long forsaken.

It is surely no coincidence that the reception of Blossfeldt occurred at a time when the Bergsonian philosophy of vitalism was enjoying a resurgence of interest in interwar Britain, in ways that foregrounded the belief that contemporary art had learnt the lessons proffered by the new lens technologies so as to better represent the reality underlying living appearances.[31] Moore touched upon these philosophical sympathies in a statement of 1934, where he wrote – in terms replete with biological metaphor – that: "For me a work must first have a vitality of its own. I do not mean a reflection of the vitality of life, of movement, physical action, frisking, dancing figures and so on, but that a work can have in it a pent-up energy, an intense life of its own, independent of the object it may represent".[32] On the one hand, such testimonials bore witness to the manner in which biology had, through enhanced photographic equipment, inscribed itself upon the very psyche of the artist. The filmmaker John Grierson, for instance, considered the impact of natural history films to have been, quite literally, culturally revitalising: "I am apt to think that the cinema has done something to open our eyes in this respect, with its power of revealing the constructions of plant life, animal life, and all life together in motion. It would be more accurate to say that biology is getting into

our blood".[33] Yet, equally, Moore's comments, I feel, suggest that the expressivity of any given sculpture depends very much upon it possessing a kind of vital autonomy, an aesthetic liveliness, that is quite separate to any representational qualities it might possess, whether they be naturalistic, biomorphic or otherwise. Although one might argue a kinship between Bergson's theory of an indefatigable life force, surging through all living matter, and a Romantic desire to revive aesthetics through looking to nature, albeit through the magnifying lens of a microscope, it seems to me important to note how vitalist understandings of sculpture emphasised the phenomenological autonomy of the art object and how it kinaesthetically adapted itself to the perceptual faculties of the viewer. Nowhere is this more persuasively articulated than in Read's motile, kinaesthetic reading of Modernist sculpture, in which aesthetic perception is staged, explicitly, as a spatial as well as temporal experience:

> We cannot see all round a cubic mass; the sculptor therefore tends to walk round his mass of stone and endeavours to make it satisfactory from every point of view. He can thus go a long way towards success, but he cannot be so successful as the sculptor whose act of creation is, as it were, a four-dimensional process growing out of a conception which inheres in the mass itself.[34]

Moore, who no doubt often discoursed with Read on such matters due to the closeness of their friendship, identified this curious, phenomenological quality with asymmetry which, so he thought, generated a profusion of viewpoints in a sculpture:

> Sculpture fully in the round has no two points of view alike. The desire for form completely realised is connected with symmetry. For a symmetrical mass being the same from both sides cannot have more than half the number of different points of view possessed by a non-symmetrical mass.[35]

Interestingly, Moore supposed that asymmetry was linked to the desire for the organic rather than the geometric for: "Organic forms though they may be symmetrical in their main disposition, in their reaction to environment, growth and gravity, lose their perfect symmetry".[36] Hence, may such an opinion demonstrate the limits of Blossfeldt's influence, given how closely wedded to the geometric his photographic exposures of plants were understood to be by Wilenski and others; although even here, it is not hard to find dissenting views which, like Moore's disquisition on the progressive, piecemeal dissymmetry of organic

form, saw Blossfeldt's images as evidence of nature's propensity towards deformation and lop-sidedness. Certainly, the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer of *Art Forms in Nature* held this belief, noting that any natural form was nothing more than "the resultant of a momentary equilibrium between all the forces of the universe, and in these forces are included not only the energy of growth but the pull of substance". Blossfeldt's work, superficially so regular, thus demonstrated why "every natural form in some degree departs from a purely mathematical progression". And just as the new conception of substance – and here we might imagine the reviewer flicking through the pages of Wentworth Thompson's morphological treatise, *On Growth and Form*, to validate this claim – saw matter as no more than the temporary "coagulation of energy", so too the "work of art, like the work of nature is […] the result of a momentary equilibrium between all the forces of the universe".[37] Maybe, then, it is possible to reconcile Moore's organic, asymmetrical aesthetic with an appreciation of Blossfeldt's macrophotographs. After all, Moore's fungiform *Composition* of 1933, perceived frontally, brings to mind the structure of, say, Blossfeldt's photograph of a scabious seed, whose window-like openings evenly punctuate the kernel's surface like the two cockeyed apertures which perforate *Composition*'s bulbous, upper architecture; strange, staring peepholes whose purpose, Moore remembered later, was to make "the spaces between forms as important as the forms themselves".[38]

Nonetheless, any regularity apparent in *Composition* disappears as soon as it is viewed sideways or from the rear, where the form progressively distends, twists and truncates, so that the position of the eyelets precariously changes along with the viewpoint itself, in the same manner, we can assume, as the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer saw Blossfeldt's plant exposures gently departing from the rigours of mathematical harmony. So subtly does the asymmetry of the piece exaggerate, in this way, even the slightest irregularity in the façade, that, like Wilenski, one would be forgiven for supposing that all modern works tended towards a fundamental geometry if only apprehended from a single angle. Indeed, it is perhaps telling that Wilenski chose to illustrate his thesis with images of the front aspect of sculptures which, in their fixity, appear to exemplify the elemental immutability which he identified in Blossfeldt's prints.

Fig. 3

These considerations lead me, admittedly somewhat circuitously, to reflect on the work of Francis Bruguière as, to my knowledge at least, no other photographer in Britain during the interwar period sought to capture so eloquently the very act of circumnavigating a sculpture so as to reveal the four-dimensionality and asymmetry of form hypothesised by Read and Moore. Contemporaneously, Bruguière collaborated with several members of the English avant-garde – most memorably photographing Nash's hands for the publication *Unit 1* – although it was likely his creative partnership with Lance Sieveking on *Beyond this Point* for which he was publicly best-known, if not universally applauded. Nash, indeed, felt so strongly about Bruguière's skills as an artist that, in the course of outlining his belief that an accomplished photographer should obey the demands of light alone, he lamented Bruguière's omission from a recent French anthology on modern photography.[39] Yet, interestingly, although many critics of *Beyond this Point*, such as the anonymous reviewer in the *Listener*, believed that Bruguière's "manipulations of the human form, producing effects similar to those obtained by the amateur who unwittingly takes two (or more) exposures on one plate" were "less original and successful" than his abstract compositions,[40] it seems to me that these multiple exposures of heads and figures, dynamically superimposed and dramatically lit, foreshadow a unique range of photographs Bruguière produced, on-and-off, throughout the 1930s to illustrate the work of contemporary sculptors.

Fig. 4

If the multiple exposures in *Beyond this Point* create a sense of psychological narrative by means of overlaying images of figures into fragmentary, melodramatic tableaux of brooding physiognomies and dark-suited personages contemplating ghostly memories of love lost, then something of this effect is surely preserved by photographs such as those Bruguière took of Garnet Hennel's *Snake Sculpture* which, similarly, use photographic superimposition to generate an impression of temporal narrative. Only here, rather than superimposing exposures of figures in different postures and in a variety of settings, Bruguière overlays images of the same sculpture, taken from different angles, so that the serpentine creature appears to writhe and wriggle within the shadowy frame of the photograph. Pointedly, in the article published to accompany the image, Oswell Blakeston explained the effect of this technique. Through multiple exposure, Blakeston noted, Bruguière was able to convey even the most understated effect of perception; the slightest movement of the head or twitch of the eyes could be

suggested in ways that evoked how the mind kinaesthetically recalled visual information when apprehending a sculpture:

> In Bruguière's studies even the subtlest effects are recorded, such as those occasioned by a quick movement of the head: sometimes the memory of one glimpse is imaginatively placed over another angle, just as the spectator's mind places image over image when he may walk around the solid […].[41]

Fig. 5

Not only, so Blakeston claimed, did this technique risk "no danger of visual monotony", but it also potentially offered a boon to publishers who aimed to more accurately illustrate three-dimensional artworks. The utility of Bruguière's approach stemmed from the impossibility of a single, static photograph of a sculpture ever adequately communicating the experience, at once so tactile and temporal, of seeing it in the flesh; for whereas a painting's appearance can be sufficiently contained within the flattened dimensions of a photographic print, which echo the two-dimensionality of the painterly original itself, a single photograph of a sculpture can only occasion the most perfunctory of estimates as to its aesthetic character, for:

> A piece of sculpture or carving needs to be considered from all directions and all angles. Moreover, it requires temporal as well as spatial experience to understand a sculptor's conception: to put it crudely it is important whether one walks around a statue or runs, whether one glances suddenly up or peers gently down.[42]

Of course, Blakeston was well-aware of how closely Bruguière's photographic technique mirrored the use of double exposures in contemporary cinema, not simply through his work on the avant-garde film journal, *Close-Up*, but through having co-operated with Bruguière on the abstract film, *Light Rhythms*, in 1930. It is interesting to note, if not directly relevant to the current discussion, that *Light Rhythms* emulated Bruguière's abstract compositions in *Beyond this Point* by receiving its animation from the movement of light on highly abstract paper models, static images of which punctuate the pages of his collaboration with Sieveking. This optical effect was certainly on Blakeston's mind when, in an article on film and contemporary photography, he explained how 'superimposition […] originated in the cine-operator's brain', reminding readers of the 'superimposition work of Bruguière; form is laid,

photographically, over form so that the interstices between the reproduced solid objects make a statement, in light, of their own.[43] And, in a less abstract manner, a similar range of cinematic effects can be seen to be deployed by Bruguière in his more figurative exposures, which likewise lay form over form so as to indicate a sense of communication between individuals or else dramatically convey the function of memory.

In terms of how Bruguière applied this technique of superimposition to the task of representing contemporary sculpture, I feel he employed it to fullest effect in a photograph of Moore's 1933 *Composition* that was reproduced in Read's 1936 publication, *Surrealism*. Like Hennel's snake, the upwardly tapering form is imaged, progressively, from the rear, left-hand side and front; yet the hindmost angle, though superimposed atop the other two viewpoints, appears smallest in the sequence, while the anterior view looms large from the obscure background. In this manner, then, we can understand the photograph to perhaps exemplify Blakeston's assertion that Bruguière caught the slightest perceptual effects of the sculptural encounter for, "just as the spectator's mind places image over image when he may walk around the solid [object]", so Bruguière's *Carving in Three Positions* intimates, within the space of a single frame, the spectatorial circumnavigation of *Composition*: the composite image hence allows the viewer to imaginatively approach the object from the back, move leftwards until they reach its frontal aspect (which, one might assume, is the viewpoint from which Bruguière believed the sculpture's general appearance could be best comprehended and was, therefore, the point at which most viewers likely began or ended their perusal of the object). The wraith-like character of the superimpositions themselves also seems to validate Blakeston's contention that Bruguière's practice was as much about representing memory as it was movement, for each smaller, fainter exposure thus suggests the *recollection* of a particular angle, remembered while the viewer perambulates the object.

Fig. 6

Now, it seems possible that Bruguière, at least in the context of Read's text, *Surrealism*, was thinking of André Breton's concept of 'convulsive beauty' when photographing Moore's sculpture, for the sensation of morphological flux conveyed by 'Carving in Three Positions' outwardly echoes Breton's vision of a pulchritude that "consists of jolts and shocks [; and is]

neither static nor dynamic".[44] And it is certainly possible that Surrealist theory guided his experiments in photography more generally. After all, Breton's notion of a fluid, paroxysmal beauty was first outlined in the closing lines of his 1928 'novel', *Nadja*, whose use of photographic illustration and critically reflective narrative, arguably prefigure, in ethos if not style, their handling in *Beyond this Point*. Nonetheless, Bruguière's photographs also seem strongly wedded to interwar British ideas regarding the conception and aesthetic of contemporary sculpture; a fact that is scarcely surprising given his rootedness in the British avant-garde at this time. In the same way that Read emphasized the kinaesthetics of perceiving sculpture and how artistic creation was itself nothing short of a "four-dimensional process growing out of a conception which inheres in the mass itself", then surely Bruguière's multiple exposures, which imaginatively express not merely perambulation around the object but also its vitality as a thing beheld, in time and space, by the mind's eye, photographically represent the phenomenology of Modernist sculpture itself, its mutability of form and the unusual demands it makes upon the perceptual faculties of the spectator? If nothing else, it seems to me as though Bruguière were seeking, appropriately enough, to give visual expression to Moore's comments regarding the proliferation of viewpoints permitted through asymmetrical as opposed to symmetrical structure.

Fig. 7

Understood thus, Bruguière's photographs appear to capture the vitalism of interwar British sculpture, its partiality towards perceptual fluidity and organic form, in the way that the object represented is subject to a complex series of morphological transpositions. Looking at *Carving in Three Positions*, I am put in mind of Moore's *Transformation Drawings* which, correspondingly and contemporaneously, pictured various objects in different stages of rotation, registering the shifts experienced by these forms when apprehended in four-dimensional space.[46] Whether Bruguière's exposures drew upon, or else influenced, British sculptural aesthetics in the last decade before the Second World War, seems to me something of a moot point given how complicatedly yoked contemporary sculpture was to its photographic representation at this time. That this peculiar rapport was acknowledged by Nash in his essay on Blossfeldt brings me to consider how, then, we might unite Bruguière's fluctional, dynamic superimpositions with Blossfeldt's still, objective photographs of botanical form so that their mutual relationship with British aesthetics can be better understood. In effect, the practices of both photographers, superficially so different, appear to

be aesthetically complimentary: if Blossfeldt's photographs provided the forms through which the biocentric appetites of contemporary sculptors could be satisfied then Bruguière's exposures offered the means by which such forms could be apprehended dynamically as objects conceived, like living, vital things; perceptually capricious and emergent, as temporal processes inherent to the object itself. Thus, might we understand the Warren Gallery show of 1929 to have been particularly propitious in that the work of both Blossfeldt and Bruguière foregrounded the vitalistic leanings of Modernist sculpture, at least in terms of how the sculptural object, organic and mercurial, would be envisioned in Britain in the 1930s.

Illustrations

Fig. 1: Bird (front view), Horyuji Temple, Japan, and Karl Blossfeldt, *Shoot of Flowering Ash*, from: Reginald Howard Wilenski, *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, London: Faber and Faber, 1932, n.p. (between pp. 128 and 129)

Fig 2: Richard Bedford, *Flower*, n.d., from: Reginald Howard Wilenski, *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, London: Faber and Faber, 1932, n.p. (between pp. 144 and 145)

Fig. 3: Henry Moore, *Composition*, 1933, walnut wood, approx. 14 in. (35.6 cm), private collection; © Henry Moore Foundation (LH 132 primary)

Fig. 4: Francis Bruguière, multiple exposure, from: Francis Bruguière, Lance Sieveking, *Beyond this Point*, London: Duckworth, 1929, p. 79

Fig. 5: Francis Bruguière, multiple views of a small wooden snake by Garnet Hennel, from: Oswell Blakeston, "Sculptor, Carver and Photographer", *The Architectural Review* 77: 461, April 1, 1935, p. 162

Fig. 6: Francis Bruguière, *Carving in Three Positions*, from: Herbert Read, *Surrealism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936), pl. 59

Fig. 7: Henry Moore, *Transformation Drawing: Studies of Bones*, 1932 © Henry Moore Foundation (HMF941)

[1] Paul Nash (1932), "Photography and Modern Art" in: David Mellor (ed.), *Germany: The New Photography, 1927-33*, London 1978, p. 23. Nash's review was of the 1932 English second edition.

[2] Karl Blossfeldt, "Foreword" in *Art Forms in Nature*, London 1932, n.p.

[3] Nash 1932 (see note 1), p. 23

[4] Nash 1932 (see note 1), p. 23

[5] Anne McCauley, "Francis Bruguiere and Lance Sieveking's *Beyond This Point* (1929): An Experiment in Abstract Photography, Synaesthesia, and the Cinematic Book" in: Joel Smith (ed.), *More than One: Photographs in Sequence*, New Haven & London 2009, p. 60
[6] Nash 1932 (see note 1), p. 23
[7] Reginald Howard Wilenski, *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*, London 1932, p. 157
[8] Wilenski 1932 (see note 7), p. 158
[9] Wilenski 1932 (see note 7), p. 159
[10] Wilenski 1932 (see note 7), pp. 159-62
[11] Anthony Blunt, 'Nature and Design', *The Listener*, 11 April 1934, p. 612
[12] Blunt 1934 (see note 11), p. 612
[13] Walter Benjamin (1928), "New Things about Plants", in: David Mellor (ed.), *Germany: The New Photography, 1927 – 33*, London 1978, p. 21.
[14] Nash 1932 (see note 1), p. 23-4
[15] Nash 1932 (see note 1), p. 24
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[17] Karl Nierendorf, Preface to *Urformen der Kunst*, in: David Mellor (ed.), *Germany: The New Photography, 1927*-33, London 1978, p. 18
[18] W. Watson-Baker, *World beneath the Microscope*, London 1935, caption for pl. 7
[19] Watson-Baker 1935 (see note 18), pl. 3
[20] Watson-Baker 1935 (see note 18), pl. 47
[21] See: Vernon Blake, "A Measure of Form", in: *The Architectural Review*, February 1930, p. 95.
[22] See: Theodore Andrea Cook, *The Curves of Life* (1914). New York 1979.
[23] Cook 1979 (see note 22), p. 427
[24] Matila Ghyka, *Le nombre d'or. Rites et rythmes pythagoriciens dans le développement de la civilisation occidentale*, Paris 1931.
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[26] Herbert Read, "The Golden Section", in: *The Listener*, Issue 107, January 28, 1931, p. 142
[27] Herbert Read, "The Universal Harmony", in: *The Listener*, Issue 708, August 6 1942, p. 187
[28] Herbert Read, *Art and Society*, London 1937, p. 125
[29] Herbert Read, "Ben Nicholson and the Future of Painting", in: *The Listener*, Issue 352, October 9 1935, pp. 604-5
[30] Geoffrey Grigson, *Henry Moore*, Harmondsworth, 1943, p. 8
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[32] Henry Moore, untitled statement, in Herbert Read (ed.), *Unit 1: The Modern Movement in English Architecture, Painting and Sculpture*. London 1934, p. 30
[33] John Grierson, "The New Generation in Sculpture", in: *Apollo*, Vol. XII, November 1930, p. 350
[34] Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art*, London 1931, p. 153
[35] Moore, in: Read 1934 (see note 32), p.29
[36] Moore, in: Read 1934 (see note 32), p.29
[37] Anon., "Art and Nature", in: *The Times Literary Supplement*, October 31 1929, p. 871
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[40] Anonymous review of *Beyond this Point* in "The Listener's Book Chronicle", in: *The Listener*, Issue 47, December 4, 1929, p. 760

[41] Oswald Blakeston, "Sculptor, Carver and Photographer", in: *The Architectural Review* Vol. 77, Issue 461, April 1, 1935, p. 162

[42] Blakeston 1935 (see note 41), p. 162

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[44] André Breton, *Nadja*. London 1999, p. 160

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